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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a survey of the attitudes of school personnel toward teacher unions and draws some implications concerning the dynamics of labor relations in school systems. Teachers, principals, superintendents, and school board members responded to questions on what areas unions should be involved in, degree of satisfaction with the local, and the state of labor management relations in the district. Teachers showed general satisfaction with their local and favored more union involvement in all areas addressed. Principals felt constrained by many work-related benefits teachers have obtained and saw the union as disrupting their ability to run their schools. Although superintendents were more strongly opposed to union involvement in work-related areas and more unsympathetic to economic demands than principals, they were very satisfied with the union and with labor relations because they perceived the unions as a medium for dealing with the entire staff. School boards regarded the unions as limiting their ability to develop policy and administer schools economically and wanted unions to decrease levels of involvement in all areas. Thus a graduated shift in attitudes is seen as one moves up the district hierarchy, with attitudes reflecting the degree to which the union has helped or hindered the respondent's job performance. (MJL)

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Labor Relations in School Systems:
Attitudes Toward Teachers Unions Across School District Hierarchies[1]

In: Consensus and Power in School Organizations

by

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If one were to ask educational practitioners what forces have had a significant impact on public education in the last decade, the growth of teachers unions would be likely to emerge near the top of the list. Since the advent of teacher unionization in New York City in the late sixties, teachers unions have spread to encompass urban, suburban, and rural districts in a majority of states. Early research sought to identify those factors which predisposed teachers to militancy, isolating such items as age, sex, and type of school taught in.[2] Once unions became established, research efforts shifted to concentrate on the gains accruing to teachers from unions. These studies showed small economic benefits,[3] some improvement in working conditions,[4] and more recently, the attainment of influence over professional issues.[5] There can be no doubt that these gains affect not only teachers, but all school personnel. Yet surprisingly little attention has been paid to how teachers and other school personnel perceive this impact and their attitudes toward teachers unions.

The attitudes of school personnel toward teachers unions will be determined, in part, by the affect that teachers unions have on the performance of a person's job. To the degree that the teachers union makes a person's job easier, we would expect that person to have positive attitudes regarding the union. We would also expect a person to resist union involvement in those areas which would adversely affect their job performance. Two things follow from this line of argument. First, one's position in the school district hierarchy and the differing demands which result should determine, in part, one's attitudes toward the teachers union. In other words, teachers, principals, superintendents, and school boards should have different attitudes toward teachers unions. These differences in attitudes are likely to be a major source of conflict over

union related matters. Second, these differences in attitude should reflect the impact of teachers unions on the different roles. Thus by examining the attitudes of assorted school district personnel, we will be able to gain a preliminary understanding of the affect of teachers unions on the entire school system. At a time when both public education and public employee unions are the subject of so much media scrutiny, it seems imperative that we begin to examine the attitudes of school district personnel toward teachers unions. In this article, we would like to report briefly on the results of such an investigation.

The Research

As part of a project investigating power and consensus in school districts, a survey was distributed to a random sample of 83 school districts in New York State, stratified according to geographic location, size, wealth, and expenditures. In each district, the superintendent, central office administrators, school board members, teachers in the largest elementary school and largest high school, and the principals of those schools received questionnaires. Included in the survey were a series of items dealing with the teachers union in the district. These questions focused on what areas the union should be involved in, the degree of satisfaction with the local, and the state of labor management relations in the district. The data reported here are based on responses to these items obtained from teachers, principals, superintendents, and school board members.

Teachers

For teachers, the union provides a collective voice which serves as a source of power far beyond that available to individual teachers. Unions have flourished precisely because of the inability of individual

teachers to influence their salaries or working conditions. Unions have provided teachers with that influence and as such we would expect them to be satisfied with their local union. The data bear this out - just under 90% of the teachers responding are either very satisfied or satisfied with their local union. Presumably teachers feel the union is helping them to do a better job.

If the union provides teachers with a source of influence, and the outcomes of this influence serve as the primary basis of satisfaction, the question arises as to where teachers would like this influence applied in the future. Respondents were presented with a list of 15 areas and 6 asked whether they would like their union to become less involved (scored 1), maintain the current level of involvement (scored 3), or become more involved (scored 5) in each area. A number of the results are worth noting. First, there are no areas in which the teachers want their union to become less involved. A majority of members would like the union to maintain their current level of involvement in many areas - prep time, leaves, tuition reimbursements, grievance handling, communicating to members, and giving members a say in the union. Yet on the average, teachers want more involvement in all areas. Areas which are of particular importance to teachers are: insurance, where over 60% of teachers desire more union involvement; obtaining a say in the administration, just under 60%; extra-duty compensation, 58.7%; class size, 56.1%; student discipline and student rights, 54.4%; and salary, 53.8%. In addition, more teachers desire increased involvement in evaluation than want the union to maintain their current level of involvement (48.2% versus 47.4%). If the local unions are responsive to the demands of their constituencies, it appears that they will continue to press for both economic benefits and a say over the determination of working conditions.

The strength of the union and its ability to meet the desires of its members depends upon the support of individual teachers. In many districts, this support is most apparent in times of crisis, with a small group of officers left to carry out the day-to-day administration of the union at other times. This is reflected

in our results, where over 91% of our sample were members of the union and maintained some level of involvement in the local (with over 88% voting in union elections and 84% attending some union meetings), while just under 64% of our respondents felt that the administration of the local was handled by a small group of teachers with the majority of teachers just going along. Most teachers are satisfied with this arrangement, since only 35.5% desire more say in the union. In some instances, the strain of holding down what is essentially two jobs, combined with the generally low level of member involvement, hinders the development of adequate communication between the local and its members. Many teachers (46.5%) rely on their fellow teachers as their primary source of information on union matters, and 44% want the union to improve its communication to its members.

Despite some apparent apathy, teachers do want the union to press for their demands against the administration. In this confrontation, there is no question of who has the most power. When asked who has more power, the administration (scored 1) or the union (scored 7), the average response was 2.49, indicating a balance of power in favor of the administration. Perhaps this difference in power explains why over 52% of the teachers feel the administration has a favorable attitude toward the union, while only 45% of the teachers feel the union has a favorable attitude toward the administration. The union is in the unenviable position of having to gain concessions from an administration which has more power than the union, and in that position, it's hard to adopt a favorable attitude. Despite this, just under 68% of our respondents are satisfied with the labor management relations in their district. Teachers unions have been successful and their members recognize this. They just want the success to continue.

Principals

Principals are often depicted as the person caught in the middle. They are usually given free rein over their buildings and expected to handle

any problems their staff may have. Further, many are recently out of the ranks of teachers themselves (indeed, over 62% of our respondents were members of teachers unions), and these two elements combine to create some sense of sympathy for teachers needs. Still, principals are administrators and ultimately must answer to the central administration. Thus the image of the principal as caught in the middle. The data from our principal questionnaires support and reflect the dilemma confronting the principal.

The principals responses to the series of questions on union involvement, while reflecting an administrative position, are on the average closer to the teachers scores than either the superintendent or the school board scores. Of the fifteen areas included in our questions, the majority of principals would like to maintain the current level of union involvement in all fifteen areas. The average scores, however, show six areas in which principals would agree to more union involvement: salary, insurance, extra-duty compensation, student discipline and student rights, giving members a say in the union, and improving communication to members. These averages indicate a sympathy for the economic plight of teachers, a concern with the common goal of educating students, and a desire for the union to be more representative (66% of the principals consider the union as dominated by a small group. Ironically, however, the average scores show that principals view the union as more representative than teachers do). The principals sympathy for teachers also appears in responses to the question on administrative attitudes toward the union, where 75% of our respondents view the administration attitude toward the union as favorable, the highest percentage of any group. Average scores for the remaining areas reflect a desire for less union involvement. In comparison to teacher responses, the principals show the most pronounced differences in regards to class size, prep time, non-teaching

duties, and gaining a say in the administration of the district. These are all areas in which teachers desire more involvement, while principals want less union involvement. Not surprisingly, these are all areas which directly impact on the principal's ability to run his school. If the union were to increase its involvement in these areas, the principal would be placed under additional constraints in the performance of his or her job.

The idea that the union places constraints on the principal, constraints which the principal would just as soon not have to deal with, receives support from responses to other questions. For example, on the average, although the administration maintains an edge, principals see the union as having more power than any of the other groups who responded to our surveys. This suggests that unions do indeed constrain principals behavior. Yet the union as an entity is something principals try to avoid dealing with. They prefer to distribute information on union affairs directly to their staff rather than through the union, while their primary sources of information are either their teachers (41.8%) or the administration (46.9%). These figures reflect the dilemma confronting principals. They want to work with their staff and are therefore sympathetic to teachers demands, but they also are administrators who feel unduly constrained by the presence of the union. One gets the feeling that principals wish the union would either go away or deal with the central administration. As a result, principals are less satisfied with the local than are teachers, but more satisfied with labor management relations.

Superintendents

As administrator for the district and by law the person who contracts with the union, superintendents often find themselves in a peculiar love-hate relationship with their local teachers union. On the one hand,

the demands by unions are a major constraint on administrative behavior and a significant factor in terms of the school budget. On the other hand, as is recognized in collective bargaining, the presence of a union provides the administration with a single party with which to work out agreements. Once an agreement is reached, the administration obtains a certain degree of predictability for the duration of the contract.

This ambivalence is reflected in our survey results. When asked about the desired level of union involvement in different areas, the majority of superintendents indicated that in eleven of the fifteen areas, the union should maintain their current level of involvement. Two areas in which the majority of superintendents want less union involvement are class size (50%) and gaining a say in the administration of the district (47.8%). In addition, when one looks at the average scores, superintendents also want less union involvement in extra-duty compensation, prep time, non-teaching duties, leaves, tuition reimbursement, evaluation, gaining a say in how teachers do their jobs, and grievance handling. Generally, there are areas in which union involvement reduces administrative discretion and ultimately increases school district costs. The fact that the average scores for union involvement in salary and insurance show a small desire for more involvement suggests that it is the constraints on administrative behavior which superintendents want to eliminate, even if they have to buy the union out. Compared to the principals, however, the superintendents show a stronger desire to reduce constraints on their behavior and less of a willingness to pay for it. As chief administrators, superintendents apparently feel more than principals both the constraints and the costs imposed by the union.

The two areas in which the majority of superintendents want more union involvement are providing members a say in the union (58.7%) and

improving communication to members (47.9%). If the union were to become more involved in these areas, superintendents could be sure that in dealing with the union, they are dealing with their entire staff. Although the majority of superintendents (63%) feel the union is run by a few active people, on the average the superintendents consider the union as more representative of the teachers than any of the other groups responding to our survey. As noted earlier, insofar as the union is representative, it eases the superintendents job by providing him a single body with which to work out agreements. Indeed, over 60% of the superintendents receive information on union matters primarily from the union (although they distribute information through the union, the administration, and directly to personnel). The fact that over 80% of the superintendents are satisfied with the local, while over 91% are satisfied with the labor management relations in their district (with both of these on the average showing more satisfaction than any other group responding) reinforces this interpretation. The superintendents see their relationship with the union as generally cooperative (71.7% consider the administration's attitude as favorable and 73.9% consider the union's attitude as favorable), and one in which the administration has more power than the union. The question is whether superintendents can use this power to reduce the constraints on their behavior and still maintain a cooperative relationship.

School Boards

School boards are the policy making bodies in school districts. They are the community's representatives, charged with insuring that the schools provide the best possible education, usually at the lowest cost possible. We can expect the board to consider the union as an adversary which infringes both on their ability to make policy and economize school district operations. The board's lack of sympathy with the union is accentuated

by it's lack of contact with the union - over 80% of the board members report that the administration serves as its primary source of information on union matters. Since the administration will have occasion to report to the board primarily on union demands, it follows that this would add to the natural antagonism between the board and the local teachers union.

The results of our survey reflect this antagonism. Although a majority of the board respondents are satisfied with the local union (60.4%), on the average, among our respondents the board is the group least satisfied with the local. They are also second only to the teachers in terms of their average dissatisfaction with the labor management relations in their district and in their perception of the unfavorableness of both the unions attitude toward the administration and the administration's attitude toward the union. Board members also consider the union as having more power than any other group of respondents except the principals. Thus despite the fact that a majority of board members are satisfied with the local and labor management relations, there is an underlying current of antagonism which reflects the generally adversarial nature of the relationship between the school board and the teachers union.

The nature of this opposition can be seen by considering the boards responses to our questions on desired level of union involvement in different areas. The majority of board members would like the union to maintain its desired level of involvement in six of the fifteen areas listed in our survey. Of the remaining nine areas, the majority of board members would like the union to decrease its involvement in class size, non-teaching duties, and gaining a say in how the administration runs the district. Board members are split on union involvement in both leaves, where 48.4% wanting less involvement and 48.8% say to maintain

the current level of involvement, and evaluation, where 36.7% want less involvement, 34.3% say to maintain the current level, and 29.2% want more involvement. On the average, board members want less union involvement in twelve of the fifteen areas. Only student discipline and student rights, giving members a say in the running of the union, and improving communication to union members emerge as areas in which the majority of school board members would like to see more union involvement. In general, these results reflect the board's desire to maintain its policy making authority and to reduce school costs. They also reflect the close ties between the board and the administration. Only the board's desire to see more involvement in student discipline and student rights comes as a surprise, since this position runs counter to the superintendent's desires. It is congruent, however, with the board's concern with the quality of the educational program and its role as representatives of the community.

The State of Labor Relations in School Districts

The emergence of teachers unions and the economic and work related benefits they have been able to obtain for teachers have had a profound affect on public education. Understandly, the consequences of this effect and the attitudes of school personnel toward teachers unions vary across school district hierarchies. Unions have provided teachers with a source of collective influence unavailable to the individual teacher. Teachers have improved their economic well being, while also improving the conditions in which they work. They desire more of the same, and consider the union, with its adversarial stance, the sole vehicle by which to achieve further gains. Not surprisingly, they are generally satisfied with their local. Principals, however, are a different story.

Stuck in the middle between teachers and the central administration, they are sympathetic to many of the teachers' economic demands, yet feel unduly constrained by many of the work related benefits teachers have obtained. They see the union as a power disrupting their ability to run their schools, an annoyance which they wish the central office would take care of. And the superintendents would like to be able to take care of the union. Superintendents are even more strongly opposed to the unions involvement in work related areas than principals are, and are not as sympathetic to teachers economic demands. They do welcome the union's presence, however, since it provides them a vehicle through which they can deal with their entire teaching staff at once. It also provides a certain degree of predictability to what is often an unpredictable job. Because of this, superintendent's are very satisfied with the union and labor management relations. The sense of antagonism and opposition apparent in the teachers is mirrored in the school board, only as would be expected, board members want the union to decrease its level of involvement in most all areas. The board's dissatisfaction with labor management relations is close to the teachers. The board considers the union as a constraint on their ability to both develop policy and run the school in an economical manner. Thus there is a gradual shift in attitudes towards the union as one moves up the school district hierarchy, with the attitudes held reflecting the degree to which the union has helped or hindered one's ability to perform on the job.

These differences in attitudes have direct consequences on the conduct of labor management relations. The more extreme the differences regarding union involvement in a specific area, the greater the likelihood of conflict over that issue. Similarly, the less the difference, the greater

the probability of being able to engage in cooperative relations in that area. Based on our results, we anticipate that teachers unions are likely to continue to press for further economic benefits, while also seeking more influence over both their work conditions and the administration of the district. They will meet resistance in all three of these areas, particularly over the issues of class size, extra-duty compensation, and gaining a say in the administration of the district. Indeed, given the strong feelings of the administration and school board on these matters, we would not be surprised to see management attempt to cut back on the inroads teachers unions have already made in these areas in an effort to regain control of what they consider management prerogatives. Thus we expect these issues to a source of conflict in school districts in the near future.

Several things may help to alleviate this conflict. First, it may be that management may decide to buy back some of these rights, and teachers may agree to accept. Although tightened budgets make this unlikely, if the administration feels that the discretion they regain will allow them more leeway in monetary matters, this scenario could occur. The possibility of bargaining and tradeoffs seems most likely over those issues in which there is moderate disagreement such as evaluation, tuition reimbursements, or leaves. Bargaining over any issues would be enhanced if agreement was first reached on some items. One area where this appears possible is student discipline and student rights. Here, the teachers may find themselves alligned with the board against the superintendent and principals. This combination would probably produce an agreement which would enable bargaining to proceed to other areas with a cooperative attitude. The unions ability to

negotiate would also be enhanced if it were to make some visible efforts to provide members more say in the running of the union and to improve communication to its members. These are both areas in which the administration wanted to see more union involvement, and if the union were to take some steps in that direction, the administration may adopt a more positive attitude toward negotiations.

There are recognizable differences in attitudes towards teachers unions across school district hierarchies. These differences fuel the dynamics of labor relations in school systems. Identifying and dealing with them therefore becomes a critical component of successful labor relations. Hopefully our results provide a step in that direction.

Footnotes

1. This material is based on work supported by the National Institute of Education under grant number NIE G 78 0080. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute or the Department of Education.

2. J. Alutto and J. Belasco. 1976. "Determinants of Attitudinal Militancy Among Teachers and Nurses," in Creswell and Murphy (eds.), Education and Collective Bargaining: Readings in Policy and Research. Berkeley: McCutchan; S. Coles. 1969. The Unionization of Teachers. New York: Praeger; R. Corwin. 1965. A Sociology of Education. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts; W. Fox and M. Wince. 1976. "The Structure and Determinants of Attitudinal Militancy Among Public School Teachers," Industrial and Labor Relations Review, 30, 47-58; A. Rosenthal. 1969. Pedogogues and Power. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press; H. Zeigler. 1967. The Political Life of American Teachers. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

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